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THE AFTERMATH OF NAT TURNER'S INSURRECTION¹

Nat Turner was a man below the ordinary stature, though strong and active. He was of unmixed African lin-

¹ Nat Turner was a familiar name in the household in which the author was reared, as his home was within fifty miles of the place of Turner's exploits. In 1871, the last term of the author's service as a teacher in the public schools of Virginia, was spent in this same county, with a people, many of whom personally knew Nat Turner and his comrades.

Nat Turner was born October 2, 1800, the slave of Benjamin Turner. His father, a native of Africa, escaped from slavery and finally emigrated to Liberia, where, it is said, his grave is quite as well known as that of Franklin's, Jefferson's or Adams's is to the patriotic American. There is now living in the city of Baltimore a man who on good authority claims to be the grandson of Nat Turner and a son of his was said to be still living in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1895.

In his early years Turner had a presentiment which largely influenced his subsequent life and confirmed him in the belief that he was destined to play an unusual rôle in history. That prenatal influence gave him a marked individuality is readily believed when the date of his birth is recalled, the period when the excitement over the discovery of Gabriel Prosser's plot was at its height. Nat's mind was very restless and active, inquisitive and observant. He learned to read and write with no apparent difficulty. This ability gave him opportunity to confirm impressions as to knowledge of subjects in which he had received no instruction. When not working for his master, he was engaged in prayer or in making sundry experiments. By intuition he, in a rude way, manufactured paper, gunpowder, pottery and other articles in common use. This knowledge which he claimed to possess was tested by actual demonstration during the trial for his life. His superior skill in planning was universally admitted by his fellow workmen. He did not, however, attribute this superior influence to sorcery, conjuration or such like agencies, for he had the utmost contempt for these delusions.

"To this day," says T. W. Higginson, "There are the Virginia slave traditions of the keen devices of Prophet Nat. If he were caught with lime and lampblack in hand conning over a half-finished county map on the barn door, he was always planning what he would do if he were blind. When he had called a meeting of slaves and some poor whites came eavesdropping, the poor whites at once became the topic of discussion; he incidentally mentioned that the master had been heard threatening to drive them away; one slave had been ordered to shoot Mr. Jones' pigs, another to tear down Mr. Johnson's fences. The poor whites, Johnson and Jones, ran home at once to see to their homesteads and were better friends than ever to poor Nat."—T. W. Higginson's *Travellers and Outlaws*, pp. 282-283.

eage, with the true Negro face, every feature of which was strongly marked. He was not a preacher, as was generally believed, though a man of deep religious and spiritual nature, and seemed inspired for the performance of some extraordinary work. He was austere in life and manner, not given to society, but devoted his spare moments to introspection and consecration. He thought often of what he had heard said of him as to the great work he was to perform. He eventually became seized with this idea as a frenzy. To use his own language he saw many visions. "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle," said he, "and the sun darkened—the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such you are called to see and let it come rough or smooth you must surely bear it.'"² This happened in 1825. He said he discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven, that he found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in the blood and representing the figures he had previously seen in the heavens.³ These were without doubt creatures of Nat Turner's own imagination made by him with coloring matter to make the Negroes believe that he was a prophet from God.

Receiving, as he says, further directions from the Holy Spirit, he communicated his designs to four of his most confidential friends. July 4, 1831, the anniversary of American Independence, was the day on which the work of death was to have been begun. Nat Turner hesitated and allowed the time to pass by, when, the mysterious signs reappearing, he determined to begin at once the bloody work. Sunday, August 21, he met those who had pledged their co-operation and support. They were Hark Travis, Henry Porter, Samuel Francis, Nelson Williams, Will Francis and Jack Reese, with Nat Turner making the seventh. They worked out their plans while they ate in the lonely woods of

² T. W. Higginson's *Travellers and Outlaws*, p. 284.

³ Nat Turner's *Confessions*.

Southampton their feast of consecration, remaining at the feast until long after midnight. The massacre was begun at the house of Joseph Travis, the man to whom Nat Turner then belonged. Armed with a hatchet Turner entered his master's chamber, the door having been broken open with the axe, and aimed the first blow of death. The hatchet glanced harmless from the head of the would-be victim and the first fatal blow was given by Will Francis, the one of the party who had got into the plot without Nat Turner's suggestion. All of his master's household, five in number, soon perished.⁴

The insurgents procured here four guns, several old muskets with a few rounds of ammunition. At the barn, under the command of Nat Turner the party was drilled and maneuvered. Nat Turner himself assumed the title of General Cargill with a stipend of ten dollars a day. Henry Porter, the paymaster, was to receive five dollars a day, and each private one dollar. Thence they marched from plantation to plantation until by Monday morning the party numbered fifteen with nine mounted. Before nine o'clock the force had increased to forty and the insurgents had covered an extent of territory two or three miles distant from the first point of attack, sweeping everything before them. Nat Turner generally took his station in the rear, with fifteen or twenty of the best armed and reliable men at the front, who generally approached the houses as fast as their horses could run for the double purpose of preventing escapes and striking terror. His force continued to increase until they numbered sixty, all armed with guns, axes, swords, and clubs, and mounted. This line of attack was kept up until late Monday afternoon, when they reached a point, about three miles distant from Jerusalem, the county seat, where Nat Turner reluctantly yielded to a halt while some of his forces went in search of reenforcements. He was eager to push on to the county seat as speedily as possible and capture it. This delay proved the turning point in the enterprise.

⁴ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, pp. 35-74.

Impatient at the delay of his men who had turned aside, Turner started to the mansion house whither they had gone and on their return to the wood found a party of white men who had pursued the bloody path of the insurrectionists and disposed of the guard of eight men whom Turner had left at the roadside. The white men numbered eighteen and were under the command of Captain Alexander P. Peete. They had been directed to reserve their fire until within thirty paces, but one of their number fired on the insurgents when within about one hundred yards. Half of the whites beat a precipitate retreat when Nat Turner ordered his men to fire and rush on them. The few remaining white men stood their ground until Turner approached within fifty yards, when they too followed the example of their comrades, fired and retreated with several wounded. Turner pursued and overtook some of them and their complete slaughter was only prevented by the timely arrival of a party of whites approaching in another direction from Jerusalem.

Being baffled, Nat Turner with a party of twenty men determined to cross the Nottaway river at the Cypress Bridge and attack Jerusalem where he expected to procure additional arms and ammunition from the rear. After trying in vain to collect a sufficient force to proceed to Jerusalem, the insurgents turned back toward his rendezvous and reached Major Thomas Ridley's, where forty assembled. He placed out sentinels and lay down to sleep, but there was to be no sleep that night. An attack on his forces was at hand, and the embarrassment which ensued left him with one half, but Turner, determined to recruit his forces, was proceeding in his effort to rally new adherents when the firing of a gun by Hark was the signal for a fire in ambush and a retreat followed. After this Turner never saw many of his men any more. They had killed fifty-five whites but the tide had turned. Turner concealed himself in the woods but was not dismayed, for by messenger he directed his forces to rally at the point from which on the previous Sunday they had started out on their bloody work ;

but the discovery of white men riding around the place as though they were looking for some one in hiding convinced him that he had been betrayed. The leader then gave up hope of an immediate renewal of the attack and on Thursday, after supplying himself with provisions from the old plantation, he scratched a hole under a pile of fence rails in a field and concealed himself for nearly six weeks, never leaving his hiding place except for a few minutes in the quiet of night to obtain water.

A reign of terror followed in Virginia.⁵ Labor was paralyzed, plantations abandoned, women and children were driven from home and crowded into nooks and corners. The sufferings of many of these refugees who spent night after night in the woods were intense. Retaliation began. In a little more than one day 120 Negroes were killed. The newspapers of the times contained from day to day indignant protests against the cruelties perpetrated. One individual boasted that he himself had killed between ten and fifteen Negroes. Volunteer whites rode in all directions visiting plantations. Negroes were tortured to death, burned, maimed and subjected to nameless atrocities. Slaves who were distrusted were pointed out and if they endeavored to escape, they were ruthlessly shot down.⁶

A few individual instances will show the nature and extent of this vengeance. "A party of horsemen started from Richmond with the intention of killing every colored person they saw in Southampton County. They stopped opposite the cabin of a free colored man who was hoeing in his little field. They called out, 'Is this Southampton County?' He replied, 'Yes Sir, you have just crossed the line, by yonder tree.' They shot him dead and rode on."⁷ A slaveholder went to the woods accompanied by a faithful slave, who had been the means of saving his master's life during the insurrection. When they reached a retired place in the

⁵ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Aug. 30, Sept. 4, 6 and 20, 1831.

⁶ Based on statements made to the author by contemporaries of Nat Turner.

⁷ Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws*, p. 300.

forest, the man handed his gun to his master, informing him that he could not live a slave any longer, and requested either to free him or shoot him on the spot. The master took the gun, in some trepidation, levelled it at the faithful Negro and shot him through the heart.⁸

But these outrages were not limited to the Negro population. There occurred other instances which strikingly remind one of scenes before the Civil War and during reconstruction. An Englishman, named Robinson, was engaged in selling books at Petersburg. An alarm being given one night that five hundred blacks were marching against the town, he stood guard with others at the bridge. After the panic had a little subsided he happened to make the remark that the blacks as men were entitled to their freedom and ought to be emancipated. This led to great excitement and the man was warned to leave the town. He took passage in the stage coach, but the vehicle was intercepted. He then fled to a friend's home but the house was broken open and he was dragged forth. The civil authorities informed of the affair refused to interfere. The mob stripped him, gave him a considerable number of lashes and sent him on foot naked under a hot sun to Richmond, whence he with difficulty found passage to New York.⁹

Believing that Nat Turner's insurrection was a general conspiracy, the people throughout the State were highly excited. The Governor of the commonwealth quickly called into service whatever forces were at his command. The lack of adequate munitions of war being apparent, Commodore Warrington, in command of the Navy Yard in Gosport, was induced to distribute a portion of the public arms under his control. For this purpose the government ordered detachments of the Light Infantry from the seventh and fifty-fourth Regiments and from the fourth Regiment of cavalry and also from the fourth Light Artillery to take the field under Brigadier General Eppes. Two regiments in Brunswick and Greenville were also called into service

⁸ The statement of Rev. M. B. Cox, a Liberian Missionary, then in Virginia.

⁹ Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws*, 302-303.

under General William H. Brodnax and continued in the field until the danger had passed. Further aid was afforded by Commodore Eliott of the United States Navy by order of whom a detachment of sailors from the *Natchez* was secured and assistance also from Colonel House, the commanding officer at Fortress Monroe, who promptly detached a part of his force to take the field under Lieutenant Colonel Worth.¹⁰ The revolt was subdued, however, before these troops could be placed in action and about all they accomplished thereafter was the terrifying of Negroes who had taken no part in the insurrection and the immolation of others who were suspected.

Sixty-one white persons were killed. Not a Negro was slain in any of the encounters led by Turner. Fifty-three Negroes were apprehended and arraigned. Seventeen of the insurrectionists were convicted, and executed, twelve convicted and transported, ten acquitted, seven discharged and four sent on to the Superior Court. Four of those convicted and transported were boys. There were brought to trial only four free Negroes, one of whom was discharged and three held for subsequent trial were finally executed. It is said that they were given decent burial.¹¹

The news of the Southampton insurrection thrilled the whole country, North as well as South. The newspapers teemed with the accounts of it.¹² Rumors of similar outbreaks prevailed all over the State of Virginia and throughout the South. There were rumors to the effect that Nat Turner was everywhere at the same time. People returned home before twilight, barricaded themselves in their homes, kept watch during the night, or abandoned their homes for centers where armed force was adequate to their protection. There were many such false reports as the one that two maid servants in Dinwiddie County had murdered an old lady and two children. Negroes throughout the State were suspected, arrested and prosecuted on the least pre-

¹⁰ *Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, p. 9.

¹¹ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, 102.

¹² *The Richmond Enquirer*, August 30 and September and October, 1831.

text and in some cases murdered without any cause. Almost any Negro having some of the much advertised characteristics of Nat Turner was in danger of being run down and torn to pieces for Nat Turner himself.

There came an unusual rumor from North Carolina. It was said that Negro insurgents there had burnt Wilmington, massacred its inhabitants, and that 2,000 were then marching on Raleigh. This was not true but there was a plot worked out by twenty-four Negroes who had extended their operations into Duplin, Sampson, Wayne, New Hanover, and Lenoir Counties. The plot having been revealed by a free Negro, the militia was called out in time to prevent the carrying out of these well-laid plans. Raleigh and Fayetteville were put under military defence. Many arrests were made, several whipped and released and three of the leaders executed. One of these, a very intelligent Negro preacher named David, was convicted on the testimony of another Negro.¹³

The excitement in other States was not much less than in Virginia and North Carolina. In South Carolina Governor Hayne issued a proclamation to quiet rumors of similar uprisings. In Macon, Georgia, the entire population rose at midnight, roused from their beds by rumors of an impending onslaught. Slaves were arrested and tied to trees in different parts of the State, while captains of the militia delighted in hacking at them with swords. In Alabama, rumors of a joint conspiracy of Indians and Negroes found ready credence. At New Orleans the excitement was at such a height that a report that 1,200 stands of arms were found in a black man's house, was readily believed.¹⁴

But the people were not satisfied with this flow of blood and passions were not subdued with these public wreakings. Nat Turner was still at large. He had eluded their constant vigilance ever since the day of the raid in August. That he was finally captured was more the result of accident than of design. A dog belonging to some of Nat Tur-

¹³ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 4, 1831.

¹⁴ Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws*, 303.

ner's acquaintances scented some meat in the cave and stole it one night while Turner was out. Shortly after, two Negroes, one the owner of the dog, were hunting with the same animal. The dog barked at Turner who had just gone out to walk. Thinking himself discovered, Turner begged these men to conceal his whereabouts, but they, on finding out who it was, precipitately fled. Concluding from this that they would betray him, Turner left his hiding place, but he was pursued almost incessantly. At one time he was shot at by one Francis near a fodder stack in a field, but happening to fall at the moment of the discharge, the contents of the pistol passed through the crown of his hat. The lines, however, were closing upon Turner. His escape from Francis added new enthusiasm to the pursuit and Turner's resources as fertile as ever contrived a new hiding place in a sort of den in the lap of a fallen tree over which he placed fine brush. He protruded his head as if to reconnoiter about noon, Sunday, October 30, when a Benjamin Phipps, who had that morning for the first time turned out in pursuit, came suddenly upon him. Phipps not knowing him, demanded: "Who are you?" He was answered, "I am Nat Turner." Phipps then ordered him to extend his arms and Turner obeyed, delivering up a sword which was the only weapon he then had.¹⁵

This was ten weeks after that Sunday in August when they had feasted in the woods and arranged their plan of attack. At the time of the capture there were at least fifty men out in search of him, none of whom could have been two miles from the hiding place. The *Richmond Enquirer* in giving the first public announcement, said: "Nat displayed no sort of enterprise in his attempt to escape nor any degree of courage in resisting his captor;" but this journal does not give him credit for having eluded his pursuers for more than two months or for knowing that discretion is the better part of valor. Several companies of the State militia and a battalion of United States marines

¹⁵ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Nov. 4 and 8, 1831.

had joined in the search and failed, yet Nat displayed no enterprise.¹⁶

His arrest caused much relief. He was taken the next day to Jerusalem, the county seat, and tried on the fifth of November before a board of magistrates. The indictment against him was for making insurrection and plotting to take away the lives of divers free white persons on the twenty-second of August, 1831. On his arraignment Turner pleaded "Not Guilty." The Commonwealth submitted its case, not on the testimony of any eye witnesses but on the depositions of one Levi Waller who read Turner's *Confession*¹⁷ and Colonel Trezevant the committing magistrate corroborated it by referring to the same confession. Turner introduced no testimony in defense and his counsel made no argument in his behalf. He was promptly found guilty and sentenced to be hanged Friday, November 11, 1831, twelve days after his capture. During the examination Nat evinced great intelligence and much shrewdness of

¹⁶ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Nov. 4, 1831.

¹⁷ The trial and execution over, the *Confessions* of Nat were published in pamphlet form and had a wide sale. An accurate likeness by John Crawley, a former artist of Norfolk at that time, lithographed by Endicott and Sweet of Baltimore, accompanied the edition which was printed for T. R. Gray, Turner's attorney. Fully 50,000 copies of this pamphlet are said to have been sold within a few weeks of its publication, yet today they are exceedingly rare, not a copy being found either in the State Library at Richmond, the Public Library at Boston nor the Congressional Library at Washington. These *Confessions* purport to give from Turner's own lips circumstances of his life. "Portions of it," says *The Richmond Enquirer*, "are eloquent and even classically expressed; but," continues the critic, more than sixty miles away, "the language is far superior to what Nat Turner could have employed, thereby giving him a character for intelligence which he does not deserve and should not receive." On the contrary, however, Mr. Gray, his attorney and confessor who did not write from long range, said: "As to his ignorance, he certainly had not the advantages of education, but he can read and write and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension is surpassed by few men I have ever seen. Further the calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm; still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains, yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven; with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man, I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins."—*The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

intellect, answering every question clearly and distinctly and without confusion or prevarication.

An immense throng gathered on the day of execution though few were permitted to see the ceremony. He exhibited the utmost composure and calm resignation. Although assured if he felt it proper he might address the immense crowd, he declined to avail himself of the privilege, but told the sheriff in a firm voice that he was ready. Not a limb nor a muscle was observed to move. His body was given over to the surgeons for dissection. He was skinned to supply such souvenirs as purses, his flesh made into grease, and his bones divided as trophies to be handed down as heirlooms. It is said that there still lives a Virginian who has a piece of his skin which was tanned, that another Virginian possesses one of his ears and that the skull graces the collection of a physician in the city of Norfolk.

Considering the situation unusually serious, Governor John Floyd made this the dominant thought of his message to the legislature that year. More space was devoted to a discussion of this uprising than to any other single fact mentioned in the message. He was of the opinion that the spirit of insurrection was not confined to Southampton. The Governor believed that there were well-drawn plans of treason, insurrection and murder, "designed and matured by unrestrained fanatics in some of the neighboring States, who found facilities in distributing their views and plans amongst our population either through the post office or by agents sent for that purpose throughout our territory." He, therefore, corresponded with the governors of commonwealths to preserve as far as possible "the good understanding which existed and which ought to be cherished between the different members of this Union."

The Governor believed that the persons most active in stirring up the revolt were Negro preachers. "They had acquired," said he, "great ascendancy over the minds of their fellows, and infused all their opinions which had prepared them for the development of the final design. There was also some reason to believe," thought he, "those

preachers have a perfect understanding in relation to these plans throughout the eastern counties; and have been the channels through which the inflammatory papers and pamphlets, brought here by the agents and emissaries from other States, have been circulated amongst our slaves." He considered it a weakness in the laws of the State that facilities for assembly, to plot, treason, and conspiracy, to revolt and make insurrection, had been afforded by the lack of legislation to the contrary to prevent such freedom of movement among the Negroes. He believed, therefore, the public good required that the Negro preachers be silenced, "because, full of ignorance, they were incapable of inculcating anything but notions of the wildest superstition, thus preparing fit instruments in the hands of crafty agitators, to destroy the public tranquility."¹⁸

He, therefore, recommended as a means against the possible repetition of such sanguinary scenes the revision of the laws to preserve in due subordination the Negroes of the State. He believed, moreover, that although this insurrection had been due to the work of slaves, that the free people of color furnished a much more promising field for the operations of the abolition element of the North, inasmuch as they had opened to them more enlarged views and urged the achievement of a higher destiny by means, "for the present less violent, but not differing in the end from those presented to the slaves." He referred to the free Negroes as "that class of the community, which our laws have hitherto treated with indulgent kindness," and for whom many instances of solicitude for their welfare have marked the progress of legislation. If, however, thought he, the slave who is confined by law to the estate of his master can work such destruction, how much more easy it would be for the free Negro to afflict the community with a still greater calamity. The Governor, moreover, referred to the fact that the free people of color had placed themselves in hostile array against every measure designed to

¹⁸ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, pp. 9 and 10.

remove them from the State and raised the question as to whether the last benefit which the State might confer upon them might not be to appropriate annually a sum of money to aid their removal to other soil.¹⁹

To show how general the excitement was throughout the State one needs but read in the journal of the legislature the number of petitions praying that some action be taken to provide for the safety of the people in the commonwealth.²⁰ In the Valley and in the extreme western portion of the State where few slaves were found and where there were still persons who did not welcome the institution, there were held a number of meetings in which the abolition of slavery was openly discussed and urged. Such memorials, however, did not constitute the majority of the petitions requiring action with reference to slavery. More meetings were held in the eastern counties but opinion there differed so widely that they availed little in working out a constructive plan. The larger number of these took

¹⁹ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, p. 10.

²⁰ In Fluvanna this memorial of certain ladies was agreed upon and sent to the legislature: "We cannot conceal from ourselves that an evil is among us, which threatens to outgrow the growth and eclipse the brightness of our national blessings. Our daughters and their daughters are destined to become, in their turn, the tender fosterers of helpless infancy, the directors of developing childhood, and the companions of those citizens, who will occupy the legislative and executive offices of their country. Can we calmly anticipate the condition of the Southern States at that period, should no remedy be devised to arrest the progressive miseries attendant on slavery? Will the absent father's heart be at peace, when, amid the hurry of public affairs, his truant thoughts return to the home of his affection, surrounded by doubtful, if not dangerous, subjects to precarious authority? Perhaps when deeply engaged in his legislative duties his heart may quail and his tongue falter with irresistible apprehension for the peace and safety of objects dearer than life.

"We can only aid the mighty task by ardent outpourings of the spirit of supplication at the Throne of Grace. We will call upon the God, in whom we trust, to direct your counsels by His unerring wisdom, guide you with His effectual spirit. We now conjure you by the sacred charities of kindred, by the solemn obligations of justice, by every consideration of domestic affection and patriotic duty, to nerve every faculty of your minds to the investigation of this important subject, and let not the united voices of your mothers, wives, daughters and kindred have sounded in vain in your ears."—Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, p. 165.

the form of such an improvement and change in the black code as to preserve the institution and at the same time secure the safety of the citizens.²¹

Believing that the free people of color had been or would be the most effective means in the attack on the institution of slavery, there were more memorials for the removal of this class of the population than any other petitions bearing on slavery. Among the counties praying for the removal of the free Negroes, were Amelia, Isle of Wight, York, Nansemond, Frederick, Powhatan, Fairfax, and Northumberland. Others asked for the removal of the free Negroes²² and furthermore the purchase of slaves to be de-

²¹ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, pp. 1-100.

²² October 18. This memorial circulated in Petersburg and in adjoining towns and counties is typical:

"The undersigned good citizens of the County of..... invite the attention of your honorable body to a subject deemed by them of primary importance to their present welfare and future security.

"The mistaken humanity of the people of Virginia, and of our predecessors, has permitted to remain in this Commonwealth a class of people who are neither freemen nor slaves. The mark set on them by nature precludes their enjoyment in this country, of the privileges of the former; and the laws of the land do not allow them to be reduced to the condition of the latter. Hence they are of necessity degraded, profligate, vicious, turbulent and discontented.

"More frequent than whites (probably in tenfold proportion) sustained by the charitable provisions of our laws, they are altogether a burden on the community. Pursuing no course of regular business, and negligent of everything like economy and husbandry, they are as a part of the community, supported by the productive industry of others.

"But their residence among us is yet more objectionable on other accounts. It is incompatible with the tranquility of society; their apparent exemption from want and care and servitude to business, excites impracticable hopes in the minds of those who are even more ignorant and unreflecting—and their locomotive habits fit them for a dangerous agency in schemes, wild and visionary, but disgusting and annoying.

"We would not be cruel and unchristian—but we must take care of the interests and morals of society, and of the peace of mind of the helpless in our families. It is indispensable to the happiness of the latter, that this cause of apprehension be removed. And efforts to this end are, we firmly believe, sanctioned by enlightened humanity toward the ill-fated class to whom we allude. They can never have the respect and intercourse here which are essential to rational happiness, and social enjoyment and improvement. But in other lands they may become an orderly, sober, industrious, moral, enlightened

ported. Among the counties praying for such a measure were Fauquier, Hanover, Washington, Nelson, Loudoun, Prince William, and King William. From Charles City, Rockbridge, and Caroline Counties came the additional request for a legislation providing for gradual emancipation. Page, Augusta, Fauquier, and Botetourt, sent memorials praying that steps be taken to procure an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, investing Congress with the power to appropriate money for sending beyond the limits of the United States the free people of color and such of the slaves as might be purchased for the same purpose. This was almost in keeping with the request from the Henrico and Frederick Colonization Societies asking the Government to deport the Negroes to Africa. Buckingham County requested that the colored population be removed from the county and colonized according to the plans set forth by Thomas Jefferson. The request of the Society of Friends in the county of Charles City for gradual emancipation, however, caused resentment.²³

Thinking that it might not be possible to transport all the Negroes of the country very easily, requests for dealing with the situation as it was, were also in order. As a number of the farmers had suffered from a loss of sheep by the numerous dogs maintained by slaves and free persons of color, there came requests praying that the keeping of dogs and hogs by Negroes be made illegal. Some of these petitions, too, had an economic phase. There came from Culpepper a petition praying for a passage of the law for the encouragement of white mechanics by prohibiting any slave, free Negro or mulatto from being bound as an ap-

and christian community; and be the happy instruments of planting and diffusing those blessings over a barbarous and benighted continent.

"Your petitioners will not designate a plan of legislative operation—they leave to the wisdom and provident forecast of the General Assembly, the conception and the prosecution of the best practicable scheme—but they would respectfully and earnestly ask that the action of the laws passed to this effect be decisive, and the means energetic—such as shall, with as much speed as may be, free our country from this bane of its prosperity, morality and peace."—*The Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 21, 1831.

²³ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, pp. 1–123.

prentice to learn any trade or art. Charles City and New Kent complained against the practice of employing slaves and Negroes as millers and asked that a law penalizing such action be enacted.²⁴

The question as to what should be done with the blacks turned out to be the most important matter brought before the legislature. Three-fourths of the session was devoted to the discussion of such questions as the removal of the free Negroes and the colonization of such slaves as masters could be induced to give up. The legislature met on the 5th of December and after going through the preliminaries of organization listened to the message of the Governor which had the insurrection as its most prominent feature. When the petitions from the various counties began to come in, there soon prevailed a motion that so much of the Governor's message as related to the insurrection of slaves and the removal of the free Negroes be referred to a select committee, which after prolonged deliberation found it difficult to agree upon a report.

Desiring to protect the interests of slavery, William O. Goode, of Mecklenburg County, moved on the eleventh of January that the select committee appointed to consider the memorials bearing on slaves free Negroes and the Southampton massacre be discharged from the consideration of all petitions, memorials and resolutions, which had for their object the manumission of slaves. The resolution further declared that it was not expedient to legislate on slavery.²⁵ Whereupon Thomas Jefferson Randolph, of Albemarle County, moved to amend this resolution so as to instruct the committee to inquire into the expediency and to report a bill to submit to the voters of the State the propriety of providing by law that the children of all female slaves who might be born in that State on or after the fourth day of July, 1840, should become the property of the commonwealth, the males at the age of twenty-one years and females at the age of eighteen, if detained by their owners

²⁴ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, pp. 41, 56, 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1831, p. 93.

within the limits of the commonwealth, until they should respectively arrive at the ages aforesaid. They would then be hired out until the net sum arising therefrom should be sufficient to defray the expenses of their removal beyond the limits of the United States.²⁶

After several days of heated but fruitless discussion marked by adjournment to calm the troubled waters, the question assumed a new phase when William H. Brodnax, the chairman of the select committee, reported the resolution: *That it is inexpedient for the present to make any legislative enactments for the abolition of slavery.* Whereupon Mr. William A. Patterson of Chesterfield County moved to amend this resolution so as to read: *That it was expedient to adopt some legislative enactments for the abolition of slavery.*²⁷ Around Goode's motion, Randolph's substitute and Preston's amendments centered an exciting debate showing such a wide difference of opinion that the publicity caused about as much excitement as Nat Turner's insurrection itself. Many citizens protested against such an open discussion, knowing that slaves able to read might thereby be induced to rise again.²⁸ This fear, however, did not serve very well as a restraining factor.

The warning sounded by some of these people is significant. *The Richmond Enquirer* the chief organ of thought in the State expressed in a strong editorial that the evils of slavery were alarming and urged that some definite action be taken immediately since the policy of deferring the solution of the problem for future generations had brought the commonwealth to grief.²⁹ Certain ladies from Fluvanna County said in their memorial: "We cannot conceal from ourselves that an evil is among us, which threatens to outgrow the growth and eclipse the brightness of our national blessings."³⁰ Brodnax deplored the fact that the

²⁶ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, p. 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁹ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. 7, 1832.

³⁰ Drewery, *The Southampton Insurrection*, p. 165.

time had come in Virginia "When men were found to lock their doors and open them in the morning to receive their servants to light their fires, with pistols in their hands."³¹

A summary of this debate shows that a few members of the legislature desired instant abolition, a much larger number, probably a majority of the body, wanted to work out some scheme for gradual emancipation, and others feeling that the slaves could be controlled by severe laws, endeavored to restrict the effort to the removal of the free people of color. Certain citizens of Hanover desired to lay a tax on slaves and free Negroes to raise funds to deport them all.³² The unfortunate development, however, was that no one knew exactly what he wanted, no one came to the legislature with a well-matured plan to remedy the evils, and every man seemed to be governed in his action by his local interests rather than those of the commonwealth.

The Preston amendment was, after an exciting discussion, finally defeated on the 25th of January by a vote of 58 to 73. Thereupon on motion of Mr. Archibald Bryce, of Goochland County, the legislature amended the report of the select committee by inserting the following: "Profoundly sensible of the great evils arising from the condition of the colored population of this commonwealth induced by humanity, as well as by policy to an immediate effort for the removal in the first place, as well of those who are now free, as of such as may hereafter become free: believing that this effort, while it is in just accordance with the sentiment of the community on the subject, will absorb all our present means, and that a further action for the removal of the slaves should await a more definite development of public opinion."³³

This resolution aptly describes the situation resulting after the prolonged discussion. A majority of the members believed that slavery was an evil, but no one was willing to pay the cost of exterminating it. It was easily shown that

³¹ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Dec. 17, 1831.

³² *Ibid.*, Nov. 18, 1831.

³³ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, p. 110.

because of unprofitable slave labor the commonwealth was lagging behind the free States and that the free labor essential to the rebuilding of the waste places in the State would never come to the commonwealth as long as there would be competition with slave labor. It was soon apparent, however, that a State with such a diversity of interests, one-half slave and one-half free could not legislate on slavery. This compromising resolution of procrastination, therefore, was adopted as the best Virginia could under the circumstances be induced to do for the extermination³⁴ of its worst evil.

The debate proved to be valuable to the abolitionists. In the course of his remarks Mr. Brodnax declared that the confidence of the people seemed to be gone. "Under such circumstances life becomes a burthen and it is better to seek a home in some distant realm and leave the graves of our fathers than endure so precarious a condition." It was evident, he thought, that something must be done; and although measures for the removal of this evil might not,

³⁴ Before the insurrection free men of color voted in North Carolina and at least one well-authenticated case exists of a colored voter in Virginia prior to 1830. A native of Virginia long a resident of Massachusetts is an authority for the statement that the facilities for higher education of the Negro were quite as good in Richmond as in Boston at that time. There was published in a paper of the time an account of the celebration of the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1827, by the free people of color of the city of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The orator of the day was Isaac N. Carey.

In North Carolina John Chavis, a Negro, rose to such excellence as a teacher of white youth that he is pronounced in a biographical sketch, contained in a history of education in that State, published by the United States Bureau of Education, as one of the most eminent men produced by that State. Though an unmistakable Negro, as a preacher he acceptably filled many a white pulpit and was welcomed as a social guest at many a fireside. Such was the bitterness against the race growing out of Nat Turner's Insurrection, however, that even such a man fell under the ban of proscription.

One of the preachers to whom Governor Floyd had reference quietly ignored the suggestion in the message of his Excellency and kept up his work. He was a Baptist preacher, William Carney, the grandfather of the famous Sergeant William H. Carney, of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. At the same time a daughter of his and a Methodist in a neighboring town "bearded the lion in his den" by actually collaring and driving out the leader of a party of white men who broke into a Negro religious meeting.

perhaps be arrived at immediately yet some plan for its gradual eradication would probably be hit upon. A system might be concocted by degrees to embrace the whole subject and it was therefore necessary to consider it in all its bearings.³⁵

Mr. Chandler said that he in common with his constituents looked forward to the passage of a law for the removal of the free blacks. He was also in favor of the consideration of any plan which might remove entirely at some future time, the greatest curse that had ever been inflicted upon this State. He would look upon the day on which the deliverance of the commonwealth from the burden of slavery should be accomplished as the most glorious in the annals of Virginia since the fourth of July, 1776.³⁶ Mr. Moore did not wish to entangle the committee on the subject of getting rid of the free black population of this State. That population, he knew, was a nuisance which the interests of the people required to remove, but there was another and a greater nuisance, slavery itself. He wished that it should be considered and if it were possible to devise any plan for the ultimate extinction of slavery, he would rejoice.³⁷

Mr. Bolling rose in his remarks to a height of moral sublimity. "We talk of freedom," said he, "while slavery exists in this land; and speak with horror of the tyranny of the Turk. We foster an evil which the highest interests of the community require should be removed, which was denounced as the bans of our happiness by the Father of the Commonwealth and to which we trace the cause of the lamentable depression of Eastern Virginia. Every intelligent individual admits that slavery is the most pernicious evil with which a body politic can be afflicted."³⁸

Mr. Randolph, the grandson of Thomas Jefferson, said that it was the dark, the appalling, the despairing future

³⁵ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. 11, 1839.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Jan. 11, 1839.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 19, 1832.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Jan. 24, 1832.

that had awakened the public mind rather than the Southampton Insurrection. He asked whether silence would restore the death-like apathy of the Negro's mind. It might be wise to let it sleep in its torpor; "but has not," he asked, "its dark chaos been illumined? Does it not move, and feel and think? The hour of the eradication of the evil is advancing, it must come. Whether it is affected by the energy of our minds or by the bloody scenes of Southampton and San Domingo is a tale for future history."³⁹ Mr. Faulkner addressed the House in favor of the gradual extinction of slavery, concluding with these words: "Tax our lands, vilify our country, carry the sword of extermination through our defenceless villages but spare us the curse of slavery, that bitterest drop from the chalice of the destroying angel."⁴⁰

Mr. MacDowell, referring to the insurrection, thus described its terror and its awful lesson: "It drove families from their homes, assembled women and children in crowds in every condition of weakness and infirmity, and every suffering that want and terror could inflict, to escape the terrible dread of domestic assassination. It erected a peaceful and confiding State into a military camp which outlawed from pity the unfortunate beings whose brothers had offended; which barred every door, penetrated every bosom with fear or suspicion, which so banished every sense of security from every man's dwelling; that, let but a hoof or horn break upon the silence of the night, and an aching throb would be driven to the heart. The husband would look to his weapon and the mother would shudder and weep upon her cradle. Was it the fear of Nat Turner and his deluded drunken handful of followers, which produced such effects? Was it this that induced distant counties where the very name of Southampton was strange to arm and equip for a struggle? No sir, it was the suspicion eternally attached to the slave himself, a suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that the same bloody deed might

³⁹ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. 25, 1832.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Jan. 26, 1832.

be acted over at any time and in any place, that the materials for it were spread through the land and were always ready for a like explosion."⁴¹

Although no agreement on the extinction of slavery could be reached, the question of removing the free people of color was decidedly another matter. Many who were unwilling to legislate with reference to slavery did not object to the proposal to remove the free Negroes from the State. Yet there were others who looked upon this as a political by-play. The Southampton Insurrection was not the work of free Negroes but that of slaves. Only two of the many free Negroes in Southampton county took a part in the insurrection and these two had slave wives. The North Carolina plot, moreover, was revealed by a free Negro. Many citizens agreed too with a *Richmond Enquirer* correspondent of Hanover, who in speaking for the free people of color pointed out the good they had been to the community,⁴² and the Governor who in his annual message raised the question as to propriety of removing them, said that the laws of the State had theretofore treated the free people of color with "indulgent kindness" and that "many instances of solicitude for their welfare" had "marked the progress of legislation."⁴³

A bill for removal, however, was promptly offered on the twenty-seventh of January.⁴⁴ On the first of February there was presented an additional report deeming it expedient to set apart for the removal of the free colored population so much of the claims of Virginia on the General Government as may come into and belong to the treasury of the State.⁴⁵ A few days later Mr. Moore submitted a resolution covering the same ground and calling upon the Senators and Representatives of Virginia in Congress to use their best efforts to promote this project.⁴⁶ The Matter

⁴¹ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. 27, 1832.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Nov. 18, 1831.

⁴³ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, p. 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1831, p. 125.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1831, p. 131.

was tabled but on the 6th of February the House resolved itself into a committee of the whole to take this bill into consideration. After prolonged discussion the matter was again tabled with a view to future consideration. The feeling of the majority seemed to be that, if the Negroes were removed, no coercion should be employed except in the case of those who remained in the State contrary to the law of 1806.⁴⁷ \$35,000 for 1832 and \$90,000 for 1833 was to be appropriated for transportation. A central board consisting of the governor, treasurer, and members of the Council of State was to decide the place to which these Negroes were to be expatriated and the agents to carry out the law would also be named by the same board.⁴⁸ The bill for the removal of free Negroes was indefinitely postponed in the Senate by a vote of 18 to 14 and therefore was never taken up.

The next effort of the legislature in dealing with the Negroes was to strengthen the black code as it then existed so as to provide for a more adequate supervision and rigid control of the slaves and free people of color. There was offered thereafter a bill to amend an act entitled "an act to revise under one the several acts concerning slaves, free Negroes and mulattoes." The important provisions of the bill were that slaves and free Negroes should not conduct religious exercises nor attend meetings held at night by white preachers unless granted written permission by their masters or overseers. Thereafter no free Negro should be capable of purchase or otherwise acquiring permanent ownership, except by descent, of any slave, other than his or her husband, wife or children. Further penalties, moreover, were provided for persons writing or printing anything intended to incite the Negroes to insurrection. The State had already enacted a law prohibiting the teaching of slaves, free Negroes and mulattoes.⁴⁹ The other petitions requiring that Negroes be restricted in the higher pursuits of labor and in the ownership of hogs and dogs were, be-

⁴⁷ *The Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. and Feb., 1832.

⁴⁸ *The Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1831, Appendix, Bill No. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Bill No. 13.

cause of the spirit which existed after the excitement had subsided, rejected as unnecessary. The law providing for burning in the hand was repealed. The immigration of free Negroes into the State, however, was prohibited in 1834.⁵⁰

The effect of this insurrection and this debate extended far beyond the borders of Virginia and the South. Governor McArthur of Ohio in a message to his legislature called special attention to the outbreak and the necessity for prohibitive legislation against the influx within that commonwealth of the free people of color who naturally sought an asylum in the free States. The effect in Southern States was far more significant. Many of them already had sufficient regulations to meet such emergencies as that of an insurrection but others found it necessary to revise their black codes.

Maryland passed, at the session of its legislature in 1831-1832, a law providing a board of managers to use a fund appropriated for the purpose of removing the free people of color to Liberia in connection with the State colonization society.⁵¹ Another act forbade the introduction of slaves either for sale or resident and the immigration of free Negroes. It imposed many disabilities on the resident free people of color so as to force them to emigrate.⁵² Delaware, which had by its constitution of 1831, restricted the right of franchise to whites⁵³ enacted in 1832 an act preventing the use of firearms by free Negroes and provided also for the enforcement of the law of 1811 against the immigration of free Negroes and mulattoes, prohibited meetings of blacks after ten o'clock and forbade non-resident blacks to preach.⁵⁴

In 1831 Tennessee forbade free persons of color to immigrate into that State under the penalty of fine for remaining and imprisonment in default of payment. Per-

⁵⁰ Hurd, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, II, 9.

⁵¹ *The Laws of Maryland*, 1831-32, c. 281.

⁵² *Ibid.*, c. 328.

⁵³ See Article IV, Sec. 1.

⁵⁴ Revised Code of Maryland, Chap. 52 and 237.7

sons emancipating slaves had to give bond for their removal to some point outside of the State⁵⁵ and additional penalties were provided for slaves found assembling or engaged in conspiracy. Georgia enacted a measure to the effect that none might give credit to free persons of color without order from their guardian required by law and, if insolvent, they might be bound out. It further provided that neither free Negroes nor slaves might preach or exhort an assembly of more than seven unless licensed by justices on certificate of three ordained ministers. They were also forbidden to carry firearms.⁵⁶ North Carolina, in which Negroes voted until 1834, enacted in 1831 a special law prohibiting free Negroes from preaching and slaves from keeping house or going at large as free men. To collect fines of free Negroes the law authorized that they might be sold.⁵⁷ The new constitution of the State in 1835 restricted the right of suffrage to white men. South Carolina passed in 1836 a law prohibiting the teaching of slaves to read and write under penalties, forbidding too the employment of a person of color as salesman in any house, store or shop used for trading. Mississippi had already met most of these requirements in the slave code in the year 1830.⁵⁸

In Louisiana it was deemed necessary to strengthen the slave code. An act relative to the introduction of slaves provided that slaves should not be introduced except by persons immigrating to reside and citizens who might become owners.⁵⁹ Previous legislation had already provided severe penalties for persons teaching Negroes to read and write and also had made provision for compelling free colored persons to leave the State.⁶⁰ In 1832 the State of Alabama enacted a law making it unlawful for any free person of color to settle within that commonwealth. Slaves or free

⁵⁵ *The Laws of Tenn.*, 1831, Chaps. 102 and 103.

⁵⁶ *Cobb's Digest of the Laws of Georgia*, 1005.

⁵⁷ *Revised Statutes of North Carolina*, c. 109 and 111.

⁵⁸ Hurd, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, II, 146.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 162.

⁶⁰ *Laws of Louisiana*, 1830, p. 90, Sec. 1.

persons of color should not be taught to spell, read or write. It provided penalties for Negroes writing passes and for free blacks associating or trading with slaves. More than five male slaves were declared an unlawful assembly but slaves could attend worship conducted by whites yet neither slaves nor free Negroes were permitted to preach unless before five respectable slaveholders and the Negroes so preaching were to be licensed by some neighboring religious society. It was provided, however, that these sections of the article did not apply to or affect any free person of color who, by the treaty between the United States and Spain, became citizens of the United States.⁶¹

So many ills of the Negro followed, therefore, that one is inclined to question the wisdom of the insurgent leader. Whether Nat Turner hastened or postponed the day of the abolition of slavery, however, is a question that admits of little or much discussion in accordance with opinions concerning the law of necessity and free will in national life. Considered in the light of its immediate effect upon its participants, it was a failure, an egregious failure, a wanton crime. Considered in its necessary relation to slavery and as contributory to making it a national issue by the deepening and stirring of the then weak local forces, that finally led to the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, the insurrection was a moral success and Nat Turner deserves to be ranked with the greatest reformers of his day.

This insurrection may be considered an effort of the Negro to help himself rather than depend on other human agencies for the protection which could come through his own strong arm; for the spirit of Nat Turner never was completely quelled. He struck ruthlessly, mercilessly, it may be said, in cold blood, innocent women and children; but the system of which he was the victim had less mercy in subjecting his race to the horrors of the "middle passages" and the endless crimes against justice, humanity and vir-

⁶¹ *Annual Laws of Alabama*, 1832, p. 12.

tue, then perpetrated throughout America. The brutality of his onslaught was a reflex of slavery, the object lesson which he gave brought the question home to every fireside until public conscience, once callous, became quickened and slavery was doomed.

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